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CAN WE BE MODERN WITHOUT BEING MODERNISTS ?

THIS subject is worth a careful study. The school called "modernist" presents itself as being alone able to serve our generation. In the eyes of the modernists the evangelicals, the orthodox Christians, who remain faithful to the "theology of Revival", are unable to bring forth to their fellow-men the message they need. To proclaim the great Bible doctrines, the divinity of our Lord, the atonement for sins through His sacrifice, His physical resurrection; to believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures and in their sovereignty in matters of faith and practice, in one word to preach the same Gospel as the apostles, the same as the reformers, is decidedly to be an "enemy of culture", an "admirer of holy ignorance", an "obscurantist", and so on.

How can you, they say, be men of your times if you stand for ancient ideas and worn-out conceptions, if you behave as being slaves of the past ?

Slaves of the past ! Far from it. We are slaves neither of the past nor of the present. We desire to be servants of the eternal Truth. In the past, as in the present, we try to be in contact with the testimony of those who have found the eternal truth. From the far away centuries we listen to the echo of their holy experience. We have no sympathy with the errors which prevailed in days gone by, but we rejoice in the example of true Christianity which many of our fathers have given to the world. We deeply respect the faith which has been for them the source of a pure, happy, loving life ; we gather with thankfulness the testimony of these heroes ; we are willing to keep the principles which made them victorious. When we see them so earnest in Christian service, so enthusiastic, so faithful, we feel within us an intense desire to be like them. The bread which fed the fathers is able, we are sure, to feed the children.

I

It is necessary to call attention at the beginning of this essay to this essential fact—the *unity of the human race*. No doubt each generation has its own characteristics ; from many points

of view the men of the twentieth century are very different from the men of the sixteenth, and even more from the men of Middle Ages and antiquity. But it is impossible to deny the permanency, from age to age, of a common nature. Diversity is at the surface, but the deep features of life itself remain the same ; life is always under the same laws of transmission and conservation.

The physical nature of man does not undergo essential modifications. So is it with his moral nature. Always and everywhere the real needs of the human soul remain identical : need of joy, consolation, hope, forgiveness, deliverance, truth, love.

Such aspirations manifest themselves in all literatures, in all religions, in all societies, even the most uncultured. And it is easy to find them in modern souls.

We can therefore express as an axiom, that the power able to answer such needs, if it exists, must be as constant as the needs themselves.

If, in centuries past, men have had the experience of a salvation which saved them effectively, the salvation must be as effective for us as it was for them. What was good news for them is still good news for us. The Gospel can be the Gospel, in the true sense of the word, only if it is eternal and universal.

We are now at the root of our subject: this is really modern, which is eternal and universal.

(a) *Eternal*.—We need a salvation which has proved itself effective in the past. The modern mind, as far as it is true to human nature, has respect for experience and likes to check an experience by the greatest possible number of similar experiences. It seeks after the discovery of the constant laws which rule the universe and, in this research, the testimony of the past appears to be most valuable. The repetition, in the past, of the same physical phenomenon gives liberty to the scientist to formulate a law of the physical world ; and so the repetition in the past of the same spiritual phenomenon gives ground for the acknowledgment of a law of the spiritual world.

We are really modern when we give our respect to the experience of all the servants of Jesus Christ through the centuries, and when we establish a connection between this constant experience and a constant principle.

We are really modern when we rely on the Power which has proved itself effective and lasting and will prove such in the future. Modernism proclaims that the evangelical message is bound to undergo transformations in order to suit our generation. But modernism contradicts itself by that very claim ; if the truth of yesterday is no more the truth of to-day, how can the truth of to-day be the truth of to-morrow ? These doctors make themselves the apostles of a Gospel which, to-morrow, must give place to another Gospel. They work for a teaching which, according to their own theory, must be transient. Their affirmation that truth undergoes evolution cuts their connection not only with the past but also with the future. Their work is essentially unstable ; they build a house which their children will be unable to use. They will be very soon the past, which will be despised. Their children will treat them as they have treated their fathers and will criticize and repel a modernism which will be no more modern.

How they are to be pitied, these men unable to transmit to their sons a truth which does not change ! How they are to be pitied—these young people who, attracted by the theories of to-day which have been taught to them, will be called upon in the near future to replace these by new ones ! As for us, we shall lead our children to the eternal Rock and not to the moving sand, to the eternal Rock of revelation and not to the moving sand of human speculation.

We believe in the eternal truth because we believe in the divine truth, in the truth which is God and which God is pleased to manifest to his creatures. We do not preach a salvation which would be the product of man's wondering thoughts, but a salvation which is in fact the work of the Saviour, the expression of His loving and holy thoughts ; only the salvation which comes from the Eternal can be eternal. The only salvation for the present time is the salvation for all times, the salvation worked out by Jesus Christ, " the same yesterday, to-day and for ever."

(b) We shall now try to prove that only a *universal* salvation can be really modern. If it is impossible to deny the unity of the human race from generation to generation, it is even more impossible to deny it at the present time. Above all the differences of civilizations, of languages, races, classes, religions, humanity presents itself as being more and more a whole. The wildest tribes are using our discoveries and our science ; wireless

telegraphy, wireless telephony and the marvels of aviation are eliminating distance. More than all, the admirable conquests of missions in all parts of the world show plainly that men are like one another. Human nature is everywhere the same, and it is impossible to think of a truth which would be effective only for certain nations or certain categories of men: we have no need of a Gospel which would be for the civilized and not for the savage, of a Gospel which would be for the scientist and not for the ignorant. The man who has no word for all men is not modern. At the moment when it is possible to speak from Paris to New York, it is absolutely necessary to have a message worthy of being spread all around the world.

But this universal message, who will give it to us if not the God Who has created all men with the same blood and Who offers to all men the same love, the same redemption? God only is universal as He is eternal. God only can say: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Our generation needs the God Who whose word shows Him able to save the world, but it does not need the theories which try to deny the reality of such a great salvation.

You who believe in an eternal salvation sufficient for all—you are really modern.

II

We are going to study three characteristics of the evangelical Christian, of the Christian who is faithful to the eternal and universal Gospel, and we shall see how really he can serve his generation. We shall at the same time show how the modernist, far from serving his generation, betrays it, and deceives its most legitimate hopes.

The first duty of the man who wants to be useful to his generation is to know it and to understand it.

We must be able to see our fellow-men as they are in order to know what they really need. But in order to be modern in such a way it is necessary for us to receive our wisdom from Heaven; it is only from the heavenly point of view that we can see indeed; only the just can judge rightly.

The modernists, who so often seem to confuse the spirit of man with the Spirit of God, and who speak more confidently of reason or auto-suggestion than of revelation, deprive us of the

possibility of obtaining a sound diagnostic of the human soul. By denying the infallibility of our Lord, they shake our confidence in His verdict concerning our heart ; and they leave us alone with our sins and our prejudices. A new-born man can realize the state of death in which his brethren are still lying ; but with modernism we have no new-born men because modernism denies the reality of spiritual death. Modernism keeps man in the illusions of his pride. It says to man : Do not listen to those who proclaim the deep wickedness of thy nature. Man is good ; it is only a matter of making progress in goodness, of walking more quickly on the way of righteousness, of getting nearer the ideal.

The eternal Gospel uses another language and says to the modern man : Thy soul is dead, but can be made living ; thy soul is in darkness, but can come to the marvellous light ; thy soul is lost, but can be saved by the Almighty Saviour.

Of these two languages, which is the true, the useful, the really modern ? Is it the message which flatters man in order to leave him without any hope of salvation, or is it the message which speaks truth and brings down the pride of man in order to lead him to the way of deliverance ?

Faithfulness to Jesus Christ, to the Christ of the Bible and not to the Christ of Higher Criticism, allows us to know and to understand our generation by *loving it*. If we desire to serve our fellow-men we must, above all, love them, love them intensely, even unto sacrifice. We must love them enough to suffer in face of their awful state of soul, and enough to seek earnestly after their salvation. But where can we find that holy compassion, that holy anguish ? Modernism is unable to give us that gift of tears, for its main aim seems to be to bring a false peace to the troubled conscience, to create disbelief in the possibility of a divine judgment, to take away from the religious vocabulary these terms—condemnation, wrath to come, and atonement.

To be in agony on account of sinners, one must go *to the Cross*. But which cross ? Not the cross of an unsuccessful dreamer, nor of a social reformer, victim of his unwise efforts, nor of a philosopher, victim of his speculations ; such a cross which modernism would give us is unable to teach us the price of souls. But the Cross of our Lord is not a failure but a triumph, the triumph of a God Who gives life by accepting death. The Cross on which the God-Man makes Himself one with our moral

misery, with our malediction, is the only school of true love throughout the ages, and even now.

If we look back to the past of the Christian Church, we shall notice that all true servants of the Gospel have been true servants of their own generation. It is evident with the *Apostles*. Their preaching and their letters show plainly that they had an exact knowledge of the needs of their contemporaries, that they had deep insight into their souls. They were acquainted with the superstitions or the heresies which they wanted to attack and knew how to point out their evil and refute them, because they were the faithful witnesses of the truth they had found in Christ. They have been the glory of their times, so much that their century is the century of the Apostles much more than the century of the Roman philosophers, poets or emperors.

The *fathers of the Church* have been also the men of their times and the servants of their generation, in opposition to all the modernists of their centuries. It is even more evident with all the men of *the Reformation and of the various Revivals*. They did not live in a sort of convent, far from the multitudes. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they went to the people, they spoke in the open air, they made a deep impression on their various countries, not by bringing a mutilated Bible nor a weakened message in harmony with the fashion of the day, but by telling the Good News of Incarnation and Redemption.

In the times of Luther, Calvin, Wesley, it was possible to find some modernists. Who knows of them now? But no one can write the history of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries without speaking of Luther, Calvin and Wesley. To give a more recent instance, Adolphe Monod, in France, was much more the man of his generation, by his admirable testimony to Revelation, than the Unitarian ministers and laymen of Lyons who dared to discharge him from the ministry on account of his very faithfulness.

Which are the religious books which do not get old, which are still in demand, if not those which are true echoes of the Bible?

III

(a) The man who wants to serve his generation must not only know it, understand it, love it, but *he must also be able to point out a message which can answer the legitimate aspirations of the age.*

We do not hesitate to say that the evangelical Christian alone can be equal to such a task.

Among the needs which seem specially urgent and worthy of interest nowadays, we can notice two—the want of *certainty* and the want of *power*.

The want of certainty.—The man of the twentieth century is seeking after sure knowledge in all modes of study. The scientific spirit which characterizes our times is essentially a loyal research of truth. It has no idea of making appeal to fancy but to facts. It believes in the existence of the truth it tries to grasp; it is full of respect for that truth even before it has found it; it does not pretend to create the forces of nature for its aim is only to discover these forces by being submissive to them. What is experimental method if not an act of obedience to outward reality, an attempt to get hold of some of the secrets of nature by giving nature new opportunities for manifesting its hidden laws? The experimental method, so highly and rightly prized in our century, is at the same time objective and subjective; it never leads to a confusion between the object and the subject; it always proclaims the existence of the object independent of the subject and, moreover, the infinite diversity of the object which the subject will never be able to grasp completely.

It is easy to see how deeply, in the spiritual life, this scientific claim finds satisfaction in Bible truth, rather than in modernist theories. Modernism is much more concerned with the subject, man, than with the object, God. It seems often to despise the object or to think that the subject can create and transform the object. For many modernists the soul creates the saving power, the sinner makes his holiness, faith is sufficient in itself. We are told that we are sure of being fed provided we have a good appetite! The hungry is fed through his desire for food; the sick is cured through his desire for health; the eye gets light by opening itself. If you dare to say, Where is the bread? Where is the remedy? Where is the light? you will be laughed at as being “prehistoric”, “out of date”. Modernism has made a great discovery. It feeds without bread, it heals without medicine, it gives light without the sun!

Yes, but if you try to know the effect of such an amazing method, you are not long in finding that the poor soul is still starving, still suffering, still in darkness.

Happy are we if we find on our way good Samaritans who can offer us what we need ; who will lead us to Christ, living bread, effective remedy, glorious light.

Our generation is dying by being alone with itself. Tell our fellow-men that, in the spiritual world as in the physical, there is a Truth, everlasting, above all attacks or denials, surpassing all knowledge ; but at the same time a Truth which is loving, easy to reach or rather earnestly desirous to come into our spirits and to fill them with life. Tell them that it is possible to live in Christ or rather to have Christ live in us, Christ the Object in us the subjects. And by so doing you will meet one of the deepest needs of this generation.

Is it not strange to see men calling themselves modern who dare to preach to this generation, seeking after truth, a sort of message which means nothing, brings to nothing, nothing worth having ; a message of which they are not sure themselves ; a message which is under process, movable, without any solid foundation, a mixture of yes and no, a synthesis of suppositions, probabilities, fancies ?

O give us the noble assurance of St. Paul when he says, " Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

(b) The man who wants to serve his generation must also *teach the way of a Power able to deliver our race from its sins*. Our generation is like those of the past, and even more, miserably slavish. It is a slave of alcohol, gambling, immorality ; but it is a slave also of lies, of fraud ; a slave of violence, hatred ; a slave of covetousness, ambition, love of money, despotism. Worst of all we are slaves of immoralism, that is to say lack of conscience, of sense of duty, of respect for moral principles, of desire to obey the divine law.

Who will have authority over us, authority to command and to help us in our incapacity to obey ? Modernism will speak of the example of Christ, but what is the use of such appeals, if Christ is no more than a pious Rabbi who lived two thousand years ago ? They say He was a very good man, but far from being absolutely and constantly perfect. Is such a man to be the Leader of our times, the Leader of all times ?

It has never been more necessary than now to proclaim the sinlessness of our Lord, His sovereignty, His supremacy in human life. We need a divine Christ, an eternal Christ, Whose

voice must be listened to and Whose touch has still its ancient power. Jesus Christ, King of all the nations, of all men and in all His own, such is our Christ, the Christ Who said to His disciples, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, in Judaea and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

As a word of conclusion, let us say that there is only one way of making the Gospel modern : it is to live every day according to its rule and through its power. We must take for ourselves the exhortation of St. Paul when he says, "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world" (Phil. ii. 15).

Generations are passing away, but the mission of Christians remains always the same : "To shine as lights in the world." The man in whom the light of Jesus is spread is a source of light for those who are around him. He is man of the day in the true sense of the word ; his life is shining. It may be his name does not appear in the newspapers, and he is not praised by the crowd ; but he is loved and respected by those who can see Christ in him. By looking into his soul they can see that Christ is really the Life-Giver.

I have known, in the South of France, a very remarkable Christian lady, with a long and deep experience, who gave me once the secret of her inner life by saying, "My unction is with fresh oil." I never forgot that moving testimony which has been an inspiration to me many a time. Let us seek to have the same experience. Let us receive moment by moment a new blessing from the everlasting grace.

The modernism which our generation requires is a revival of apostolic Christianity, of true Christianity. The servants of the eternal Christ are the true servants of the present hour.

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